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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 VATICAN 000206

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TAGS: [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PTER](#) [KIRF](#) [VT](#)

SUBJECT: VATICAN: CONTROVERSY CONTINUES, TONE SHIFTING

REF: A. Vatican 199

[B](#). Vatican 201

[C](#). Vatican 203

[D](#). Vatican 204

VATICAN 00000206 001.4 OF 004

CLASSIFIED BY: Peter Martin, Pol/Econ Chief, Vatican, State.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

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Summary

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[1](#)1. (C) In a further effort at damage control following his remarks last week in Germany, Pope Benedict has invited ambassadors from predominantly Muslim countries to meet with him September 25. Criticism of the pontiff from the Muslim world has been well documented; there are, however, various voices defending the pope or emphasizing different aspects of the issue. Some in the Catholic world blame the media for heightening tensions. Vatican officials say privately (and sometimes publicly) that the Muslim world has overreacted. Some contacts tell us that violent Muslim extremists are reinforcing the same stereotypes they are protesting. Increasingly we have heard some tell us that the reactions in the Muslim world prove the need to address the issue. One Vatican MFA contact said the call for apology after apology in the face of Islamic violence was "like blackmail." According to one contact, the pope's main mistake was thinking that he could draw Muslims into a rational discussion of religion and violence.

[1](#)2. (C) On the diplomatic front, the Holy See has sent various messages. They asked that President Bush not mention the issue at UNGA, but did approach the UK for a statement of support. Nuncios in Muslim countries are currently approaching their host governments with a more straightforward apology than the pope offered publicly. Meanwhile, ambassadors from predominantly Muslim countries here have been active within the diplomatic corps and with the Vatican. End Summary.

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Pope to Convene Muslim Ambassadors

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¶3. (C) The Vatican announced September 22 that the pope had invited ambassadors from predominantly Muslim countries to meet with him at his summer residence at Castel Gandolfo September 25. The move is another step in the Holy See's continuing efforts at damage control following the pontiff's remarks last week in Germany that resulted in anger in much of the Muslim world (reftels). The buzz surrounding the crisis shows some signs of dying down, but recent days have also seen further developments.

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Strong Criticism and Nuanced Views

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¶4. (C) Criticism of the pope from the Muslim world is well documented. Many Muslim leaders outside of the fringe have now accepted the pope's explanation and "apology." Ref (b) noted the criticism of the pope's remarks from Catholic inter-religious dialogue experts. There are, however, various voices defending the pope or emphasizing different aspects of the issue.

¶5. (C) Some in the Catholic world (such as Cardinal Renato Martino, President of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace) blame the media for raising tensions. One Vatican contact noted that the reactions of Muslims in some Asian and African nations have been decidedly more muted than those of Muslims in the Middle East - though he said you wouldn't know that from the media. A Vatican diplomat working in the

VATICAN 00000206 002.3 OF 004

Secretariat of State emphasized that the demonstrations in the

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Middle East were not always spontaneous reactions of the masses.

Some were orchestrated by government or religious authorities, while others were smaller affairs attended by people who might as well be "professional demonstrators."

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Overreaction by Muslims?

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¶6. (C) At the Vatican, there is a nearly unanimous and strongly-held opinion that the Muslim world has overreacted. Italian Cardinal Camillo Ruini, the pope's vicar for Rome, said this publicly; in private our contacts go much further. A prominent Vatican-based cardinal known for his interfaith work told us that violent protests and the killing of an Italian nun in Somalia were proving the very point about the alleged connections between violence and Islam that Muslims were contesting.

¶7. (C) Increasingly, some at the Vatican (and Catholics and non-Catholics elsewhere cited in Vatican-based media) have

opined that the pope was right on the mark by citing the controversial quotation and focusing on the threat that religiously-inspired violence poses to the world. The reactions in the Muslim world, they say, prove the need to address the issue. In the end it might force the Muslim world or the international community to look seriously at the problem of Islamic-inspired violence - and address it.

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No More Apologies  
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18. (C) Two country directors in the Vatican MFA speaking to us privately focused on the need to move forward without further apologies from the pope. "It's like blackmail," one told us, referring to what he saw as the compulsion to placate Muslim anger and calm violent demonstrations with apology after apology. Another commented on the so-called "Day of Anger" proposed by a Egypt's Sheik Youssef al-Qaradawi. "What about a 'Day of Dialogue' or a 'Day of Understanding'?" he asked. "What message are they sending?" He echoed other interlocutors by commenting that Muslim extremists were reinforcing the same stereotypes they were protesting. Contacts were quick to admit that Christianity had its own historic baggage on religiously-inspired violence, but insisted that that wasn't really the point. "We can pick at each other's history all we want," one said, "but the question is: who is using religion to inspire violence in 2006? What can we do about it and how can we move forward?"

19. (C) Even an official from the Vatican-affiliated Community of Sant'Egidio, a leader in inter-religious dialogue likely to be more critical of Benedict on the issue, has now tired of what she regards as the overblown reaction of some in the Islamic world to the pope's speech and his apologies. She recalled that in the offending quotation used by the pope, the Byzantine emperor was speaking to an educated and engaged Muslim on issues of violence and religion. Where are the Muslims we can talk to today on these issues?, she asked. In her view, the Islamic world needs to address the problem of violence and religion instead of becoming enraged and bombing churches when the subject comes up. The pope's biggest mistake, she said, was overestimating the quality of the Islamic intellect and thinking that he could draw Muslims into a rational discussion of these issues.

VATICAN 00000206 003.3 OF 004

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Diplomatic Maneuvers  
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10. (C) In the hopes that the storm would die a natural death without further comment by world leaders, Holy See Deputy FM Monsignor Pietro Parolin had called the Charge September 19 to request that President Bush avoid any mention of the controversy in his UNGA speech. (In fact, the request came just after the conclusion of the President's remarks, which in any case did not address the matter.) Parolin seemed harried during the conversation - a state easily explained by the strain of events

on the Vatican's streamlined bureaucracy. The efficient Parolin would normally not make a tardy request such as this, but the current crisis, combined with a new Secretary of State (Cardinal Bertone) in place and a new Foreign Minister (Archbishop Mamberti) on the way have stretched personnel in the Vatican MFA to the limit.

¶11. (C) The Vatican's diplomatic message on the issue has been mixed. The request regarding the President notwithstanding, we understand the papal nuncio in London approached the UK shortly after the story broke to ask for a statement of support from them. The UK responded that they thought any statement at that time from them would be unhelpful. Cherie Blair was to arrive in Rome on a previously-scheduled trip September 20, however, and was scheduled to meet with several cardinals, expressing her hopes for reconciliation. Other nuncios in Muslim countries are currently approaching their host governments to clear the air. Contacts tell us that while the pope's messages of regret have been carefully worded - expressing sorrow for the reactions of the Muslim world rather than for using the quotation at all -- nuncios are authorized to be more direct in their apologies.

¶12. (C) Meanwhile, ambassadors from predominantly Muslim countries here have been active within the diplomatic corps (reftels) and have approached the Vatican for "clarification" of the pope's comments, as noted above. Monsignor Khaled Akasheh, Secretary of the Pontifical Commission for Religious Relations

SIPDIS

with Muslims, told the Charge that Muslim ambassadors in Rome had been quite rational on the issue and accepted the pope's sincerity. Many in their countries did not, however, and this would make dialogue between Islam and Christianity more difficult. The Moroccan ambassador to the Holy See was recalled to Rabat for some days, but a colleague claimed that he never really left Rome. Might as well save the airfare, another ambassador chuckled to us.

¶13. (C) Egyptian Ambassador Nevine Simaika Halim Abdalla, a Muslim whose father was a Coptic Christian, has been a leader on the issue in close contact with the Vatican and others in the diplomatic corps. She told the Charge September 21 she had been trying to put the best face on the issue. She had argued with her government against being recalled, and in the end was not summoned home. Still, she was concerned about the pope's underlying views on Islam. While condemning al Qaeda and other extremists, she noted wars of religion in the Christian past. She asked that the Vatican focus on the "many good things" about Islam, and things that Christianity and Islam share, such as reverence for Jesus and Mary, rather than focusing on the negative. In a variation on the suggestion that the Holy See delete the offending quotation when it releases the final text of the Regensburg speech, Abdalla suggested to the Vatican that it include a footnote after the passage, pointing out that the pope had disassociated himself from it. There is no indication that the Holy See will agree, but we note that the Vatican customarily releases papal texts with footnotes after the event. This solution is much more likely than simply removing the quotation (ref d).

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Comment  
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¶14. (C) Post has been active with the diplomatic corps, advocating for calm. We will also continue to stress to our diplomatic colleagues the importance of maintaining a climate supportive of interfaith dialogue. The Holy See is a key figure in ongoing issues between the Islamic world and the West; its input and efficacy is crucial to avoiding a war of civilizations. Post will report septel on how the Vatican will move ahead in the aftermath the controversy.  
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